

Speech by the High Representative and EU Special Representative Christian Schwarz-Schilling at the Drvar Municipal Assembly



History Is on the Side of Those Who Come Home

Madam Mayor, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very pleased to be back in Drvar today. I first visited this municipality a decade ago, in what were very different circumstances. This is therefore an emotional return for me and I thank each and every one of you for coming here today.

I am particularly pleased to have the opportunity to speak at the Municipal Assembly. When I first visited the town, this building was off limits.

And I am pleased, too, that today we are here to discuss return and reconciliation.

Return and reconciliation are the twin pillars of Drvar's post-war recovery and the twin pillars of the post-war recovery of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole.

How much progress has been made in this field during the past twelve years?

A vast amount.

Is it enough?

Of course it isn't.

The process of return in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been undertaken on a massive scale and has involved complex challenges that have been met in different ways in different communities, from Drvar to Srebrenica, from Mostar to Bijeljina.

It has often been possible to apply lessons learned in one community to challenges faced in another. In this respect I would draw your attention to the current effort to move to a new phase in the long and difficult return process that is underway in Srebrenica.

Of course, Srebrenica is a special case; genocide was committed there. But the mechanisms being developed and set in place to help returnees in Srebrenica can also be applied here in Drvar and elsewhere in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In the coming week, my Office – in an exercise that will specifically address the situation in Srebrenica but which has relevance to other communities – is bringing together State, Entity and municipal agencies and their international partners in order to agree on the most effective ways of eliminating, for example, bureaucratic obstacles to return such as difficulties in accessing health and social services. We are also looking at programmes that can help attract investment to the community in order to create desperately needed jobs.

Economic assistance, in Srebrenica and anywhere else in Bosnia and Herzegovina for that matter is an indispensable pillar of sustainable return. It is not a palliative but a practical prerequisite for communities to live in dignity.

Return is a multifaceted exercise. A step forward in one place makes it easier to take a step forward somewhere else. Momentum can be built up, and success stories can be shared. What happens in Srebrenica has a bearing on what happens in Drvar, and vice versa.

Since the end of the war, more than one million of the two

million people who were displaced by the fighting have had their property rights restored to them. A large number have chosen not to return to their former communities, opting instead to sell their homes. But large numbers of people – and Drvar has been an important example of this – have chosen to come home and to restart their lives in communities that were devastated between 1992 and 1995.

Today, this choice has the public support of every mainstream political party. As we all know, this was not always the case. There was a time, up until a few years ago, when politicians in this country were explicit and outspoken in their active opposition to return.

That was cowardly. Those who fought that opposition and insisted on their legal and moral right to return were courageous. Despite unpromising beginnings in a brutal and fear-filled environment – courage defeated cowardice. This was a victory of enormous significance, and no one should make light of it.

When I first came to Drvar – exactly ten years ago next week – the resident population was almost exclusively Croat consisting largely of families who had been displaced from their homes elsewhere in the country. Most of the Serbs from the town had been displaced to the area around Banja Luka.

The Mayor of Drvar at that time flatly refused even to discuss returns. He said it was not within his competency. I therefore held talks with his deputy, though he was hardly more accommodating.

I argued that all citizens had an inalienable right to return to their homes. However, this was a principle that both the mayor and his deputy did not accept. The talks were fruitless. Worse, soon after they ended, 22 homes in the centre of the town, belonging to families that had been displaced, were deliberately set ablaze and burned down.

This was a very unpromising beginning. Yet return to Drvar did take place. History was on the side of those who came home and those who accepted them when they came home.

Despite the violence of May 1997, those who upheld the right to return prevailed. This was reflected in the municipal elections of September 1997, when Mile Marceta – whom I'm delighted to see here today – and his pro-return coalition won a two-thirds majority in the Drvar Municipal Assembly.

As we all know, the situation remained tense. Mr Marceta could not be formally installed as mayor, and violence broke out again in the period after the election, when Mr Marceta was physically assaulted.

It takes a long time to change hearts and minds.

But the process that began in 1997 – a process in which more and more citizens have been able to accept the right of return and embrace reconciliation –has continued.

It will not be complete until all of the citizens of this community are fully enfranchised economically, socially and politically. The crimes of the past continue to exercise a damaging influence on the present – in terms of real and perceived prejudice, in terms of suspicion and exclusion.

We have to face this fact in order to ensure that the momentum that was created in the high watermark of return, several years ago, is not lost.

Around 460 houses in Drvar Municipality have still not been rebuilt 12 years after the war, and UNHCR statistics for Canton 10 show a negligible number of minority returns during 2006. This is a sobering reminder that – despite progress that has certainly been made – Drvar has much to do, even at the basic level of providing accommodation.

We are, nevertheless, seeing positive signs. The municipal and

cantonal authorities have reached a *modus vivendi* that increasingly allows for the pragmatic resolution of issues facing the community. This *modus vivendi* is not so much an achievement in itself but the basis for progress that can now be made.

What we now need to see is practical action to attract investment to the community and create jobs. This will involve, among other things, developing the local infrastructure, which has been woefully neglected for years. Entrepreneurs are not going to move to Drvar to start new companies as long as the level of electrification remains low and narrow, pot-holed roads are the rule rather than the exception.

Even the most courageous returnee cannot rebuild without access to employment. And the only way to make this access widespread, is to attract investment and create new industries.

All those years when mayors and municipalities poured their energies into preventing returnees from coming home they did nothing to attract investment. That, like the policy of maintaining division, has now changed radically.

Today, in Drvar and in other municipalities, we are in a race to attract investment fast enough to create jobs that will sustain recovering communities.

Practical problems – of employment, of access to social and health services – do not only affect Serbs in Drvar, or Bosniaks in Srebrenica, or Croats in Derventa. They affect every returnee in the country, and they will have a direct bearing on whether the more than 120,000 displaced people who have yet to reclaim their property rights elect to do so.

This race can be won – because at last it has become the major focus of political effort. We have to maintain that focus and ensure that everything possible is done to set in place

practical measures that make return possible.

The process will not continue under its own steam, not yet. But as returnees re-establish themselves, as communities that were fragmented are restored to something like their former status, as Drvar and other places begin to take on a self-sustaining dynamic, the return process will be driven forward towards completion under its own momentum.

We are not there yet – not by a long way – but Drvar is one community that shows just how much can be done, no matter how unpromising the initial circumstances.

I salute all of you here today. I salute you for having had the courage to return. I salute you for rebuilding your lives in the most difficult of circumstances. I salute you for your resilience and wish you well in the future.

History is on your side.

Thank you and good luck.